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Vignette Reporting

By Richard Starnes



Mario's—only place in the Caribbean where you can get a good Chinese meal."

CIUDAD TRUJILLO, June 20—It is, of course, absurd to hope ever to learn enough about a country, even one as small as this one.

A man with a great deal of facility and experience in such matters can learn to memorize the names of politicians and even match them to various bland faces. Others in my itinerant trade are more geography-minded and from those you will frequently hear such self-assured palaver as: "There's a little place on El Conde, not far from the late Jefe's Memorial Square. It's called

My own favorite system, developed out of lifelong sloth, is the vignette—the tiny event, gone in a twinkling, but which leaves all manner of significant inferences in its wake. Of course, one man's vignette is another man's vertigo; so each reader must decide for himself whether the following means nothing or something.

The other noon a colleague and I were exchanging rumors, on a one-for-one basis, on the terrace at the posh—and very nearly deserted—El Embajador Hotel. We had pretty well run out of fuel when I asked idly:

"Why do you suppose we've seen no airplanes? Every other time I've covered a nation in a state of unrest, incumbent rulers always sent their warplanes swooping around, to show worried people that all's well, or to show trouble-makers what they'll get if they get fresh. I've seen it with these very eyes in Egypt, Iran, Greece and all manner of pestilential places.

"But since we got here, we've seen nary a military airplane. Don't these chaps have an air force?"

My colleague's customarily lack-luster eyes lit up. He gummed it over briefly and then went on to more statesmanlike rumor-mongering.

The lack of airplanes was forgotten—or at least it was forgotten until breakfast time the next morning.

You are well ahead of me by now, I'm sure. Breakfast was, of course, marked by an airshow. Three fighters, flying tight formation, roared past El Embajador right on the deck. They were propeller craft, but well handled and gave every appearance of professional competence.

Later that morning, as if to reinforce the message, another buzzed our hotel at palm-tree level.

I sought out my colleague and fellow-terrace-sitter and asked him who had overheard our previous day's talk about airplanes. He shrugged and said, "The usual spooks."

"Spooks" here are oily characters lurking, it seems, behind every potted palm, as unobtrusive as Olsen and Johnson in their most preposterous moments. But before you knock Dominicans for gumshoeing foreigners, you should bear in mind that there are also an awful lot of American spooks here right now.

Was this vignette mere coincidence, or does it mean the Dominican secret service reads my dispatches and eavesdrops on my small talk?

One of the nice things about vignette reporting is that every man can draw his own conclusions, and as for myself, I'm beginning to feel like a cross between Walter Lippmann and Allen Dulles of the CIA.